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ABSTRACT

Five one-hour broadcasts of KPIX Eyewitness News (San Francisco) were analyzed to provide examples of a signification process and to understand both how humorous instances arise in the newscast and their likely meaning for the viewer. One general finding was that the amount of humor or attempted humor is quite small. Banter between anchorpersons, weather, and sports reporters occupied fewer than 60 seconds of each broadcast. All five episodes contained 12 autonomous segments that were separated from one another by commercial breaks or clearly identified changes in subject. Of the 39 instances of humor noted in the five broadcasts, (1) three appeared in the first half-hour of the program, that is, in the first three news segments; (2) four appeared in the segment of short news items following sports; (3) eleven were associated with the weather report; and (4) eight appeared in the segment of short items following the human interest feature. Of the humorous instances that appeared in the first three news segments, only one involved direct comment by an anchorperson; the other two were contained in the content of the news reports. These observations indicate that, by drawing a clear separation between levity and news content, humor serves as a boundary ritual, thereby creating a meaning context that is likely to reduce or minimize the significance of more serious content. Humor signals the viewers to switch from an informational paradigm to an entertainment paradigm. The presence of humor as an integral part of the news broadcast indicates a shift in the framework in which information is most likely to be understood and interpreted by the audience. (HTH)

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THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN THE TELEVISION NEWS NARRATIVE

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A paper presented to

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ABSTRACT

The Role of Humor in the Television News Narrative

By Philip Kipper

This paper is a semiological analysis of the humor present in five broadcasts of KPIX Eyewitness News, the top rated television news program in the San Francisco Bay Area. The analysis involved an examination of the position of humor in the narrative structure of the news broadcast as well as an investigation of the types of humor present. Humor was defined as any remark, report, comment or segment which had the clear purpose or effect of evoking laughter, instilling a tone of lightness or levity.

The paper concludes that humor serves as a "boundary ritual," thereby creating a meaning context that is likely to minimize or reduce in significance other, presumably more serious, content. Humorous banter between anchorpersons and the weather reporter, for example, signals to the viewer a switch from an informational paradigm to an entertainment paradigm.

The paper also suggests that humor fulfills an anxiety reduction function and may lure viewers into the comforting belief that threatening news can be merely "laughed away." Finally, the paper notes that the type of humor prevalent in the news broadcast may function to humanize the anchorpersons. It may also evoke literary overtones that tend to justify humor in terms of journalistic conventions.

Overall, the author concludes, the presence of humor as an integral part of the news broadcast indicates a shift in the framework in which information about public events is likely to be understood and interpreted by the audience.

In 1977 Pulitzer prize winning critic and television commentator Ron Powers published an exasperated article in which he took on local television news programs for being little more than trivial sideshows designed to fit comfortably among television's litter of sitcoms and game shows. Powers charged that the traditional requirements of American Journalism had broken down under the "imperitives of technology, marketplace primacy and the inertia of public will" (Powers, 1977).

The immediate target of this blast, as well as the basis of most of the critic's judgments, was a single episode of Eyewitness News broadcast by WLS, the ABC affiliate in Chicago. Powers chose the date of viewing at random, and it seems to have lived up to his expectations. The hour was rife with crime news, live action police chases and droll reports about the foibles of local government. In the midst of this content appeared jocular interludes in which the weather reporter conversed with a chroma-keyed forsythia bush or swapped quips with the anchorman. "It was a glib, delicious, but empty newscast--a Twinkie of the airwaves," Powers concluded.

Powers, of course, is not alone in his indignation at what passes for news on local television. Other journalists and academics continue to step forward to damn "giggling newscasters" (Kempton, 1977) or to decry their "five o'clock follies" (Noble, 1981).

A common view running through most of this criticism is that television news is failing to live up to fundamental journalistic ideals. Journalism, the critics argue, should be taken seriously because it is the public's best mechanism for getting the facts about important issues. Eyewitness News and the other loquacious local formats are selling out, for the sake of higher ratings, the Jeffersonian ideal that the public will make its own best decisions if only given the information to do so.

This perspective was invoked by television news director Ralph Rennick (1982), who looked back over 10 years of influence by news consultants, the creators of the Eyewitness News format:

> There is indisputably what Walter Cronkite has called "awesome responsibility" inherent in upholding the highest standards of ethical journalism in a free press. This responsibility can be most effectively entrusted to responsible, trained, seasoned news professionals. It cannot be abdicated. It should not be left in the hands of those who would define "news" as simply something that people like to see and hear and feel good about seeing and hearing. The First Amendment guarantees freedom of the press. It doesn't say anything about "entertainment."

Such forceful observations undoubtedly provide a needed catharsis for frustrated journalists. But one must question the critical value of a point of view that is based so squarely on an unrealized ideal. The history of the American press is richly peopled with editors and publishers who failed to distinguish adequately between fact and fiction, entertainment and news. Jefferson rolled over in his grave many times before an Eyewitness News weatherman delivered his first punchline.

The problem is that by simply condemning humor or levity in the news context, one has learned little about why it is there. It

is too facile simply to say that it is a cheap device for building audiences. Such a judgment reveals little about the meaning of this content or its value to the viewer. Nor does it provide many insights into the evolving cultural forms represented by television news or the less obvious ideological messages conveyed by such programming.

To take humorous content as seriously as it should be taken one must examine it as a communication act with symbolic value. Such an examination must explore, among other things, the narrative context in which humor appears and the meanings that it represents.

The approach I am advocating here is a semiological one. Humor in the news context can be viewed as a body of signs with identifiable signifieds and signifiers. Such an approach is not meant to denigrate the journalistic ideal that holds humorous content in low repute. But it does offer the promise of a richer explanation for its presence.

A semilogical analysis begins with the assumption that the meaning of a symbolic act (a sign) is invested in the "speakers" of a culture's languages or symbol systems. Barthes (1970, p. 14) writes that a language is a social accord that specifies the meaning of individual signs and the manner in which those signs are arranged. English, of course, is such a language and if one wishes to communicate using it one must choose from the appropriate range of signs (words) and arrange them according to pre-established rules (grammar).

Many other "languages" exist, including, for example, those which dictate the appropriate manner of dress or the order in which certain foods are consumed during a meal. In these instances

the individual "speaker" is both interpreter and producer of the signs involved.

Television news represents a similar symbolic system, with the exception that most viewers aren't producers of the signs that are given meaning within the system. However, this does not mean that viewers are inexpert at understanding the signs and their appropriate order. As Schudson (1982) points out, news presentations, whether in print or on television, follow specific conventions, which are accepted by consumers and which make the news intelligible. There is thus an expected order, which is the "grammar" of the news. A violation of the rules will cause confusion and loss of meaning.

Humor in the news context can be understood by examining both its location in the conventional news narrative and its meaning as a sign chosen from the signs available within the news "language." Barthes (1970, p. 62) and other semiologists have identified two planes of meaning operating here: the syntagmatic or structural and the paradigmatic or associative. The syntagmatic structure of the news is the order in which segments are presented, the narrative chain. Meaning here derives from the juxtaposition of signs much like the meaning of a sentence comes from the order of the words. The paradigmatic meaning is produced by the act of choice, a paradigm being the range of potentially appropriate signs. Thus the significance of a given sign can be understood by asking what sign from the same paradigm was not chosen. In addition, one may ask what other signs or signifieds (referents) are evoked in an associative sense by a given choice.

For this analysis five one-hour broadcasts from KPIX Eyewitness News were videotaped. This is the top rated news program at 6 p.m. in the San Francisco Bay Area. News items, transitions, standard segments, such as sports and weather, and special features were catalogued. The purpose here was not to conduct a content analysis with the aim of characterizing the long-term content of the program. Instead, the five programs were examined to provide examples of a signification process, to understand how humorous instances arise in the newscast and their likely meaning for the viewer.

One general finding was that the amount of humor or attempted humor is quite small. Banter between anchorpersons, weather and sports reporters occupied less than 60 seconds of each broadcast. This discovery is generally consistent with the findings of two earlier content analytical studies by Dominick et.al. (1975) and Wulfemeyer (1982), which disputed the notion that happy talk was the dominant content feature of local news programs.

Below are descriptions of humorous instances presented in order of appearance on a program by program basis. For the purposes of the analysis, humor was defined as any remark, report, comment or segment which had the clear purpose or effect of evoking laughter, instilling a tone of lightness or levity.

Program I, Nov. 26, 1984

1. Sports reporter exchanges brief remarks with anchorwoman about the weather likely for an upcoming football game; sports reporter chuckles.

2. Sports reporter introduces item announcing that KPIX will get exclusive rights to broadcast Oakland As baseball: "Here's an item

you won't hear on any other station."

3. Anchorman comments after story on expected flu epidemic: "Lot's of Luck."

4. Story on "royalty basher" delivered by anchorman about retirement of member of Parliament known for making negative comments about British royal family, e.g, "Princess Di is a very lucky young woman who married a nitwit."

5. Weatherman beginning forecast: "The word for weather today is cloudy and cold--actually that's two words."

6. During forecast with chroma-keyed shot of seagulls, weatherman comments: "I learned one thing about seagulls today. They're born brown and get whiter with age--just the opposite of people."

7. Weatherman concludes forecast with prediction of heavy rainfall likely to break record. Anchorman comments: "We're going to be treading water and making history all at the same time. Is that what you're saying?" Weatherman and anchor laugh.

8. Report on woman karate expert concludes with shot of her kicking a man in the groin accompanied by violent scream. Anchorwoman laughs when camera returns to her.

9. Anchorwoman delivers report on high price paid by Johnny Carson for new house: "If the price seems high, it does come furnished." Anchorman comments: "Hot and cold running mortgages."

10. Making transition from story on Michael Jackson concert to story about Chinese pandas, anchorman comments: "From concertmania to pandamania."

11. The program concludes with the "Eyewitness Newsreel," a one to two-minute segment that usually contains brief human interest or curiosity items accompanied by banjo or Dixieland music. Though

the reports themselves aren't necessarily humorous, the overall intent of the segment is to evoke humor by parodying old movie newsreels.

12. Anchorwoman delivers teasers for 11 p.m. report entitled Eyewitness News Nightcast: "All this tonight at 11 on Eyewitness News Nicecast...(laughter) Nicecast." Anchorman joins in laughter: "That's it for Eyewitness News Nicecast at 6. . ." More laughter and unintelligible comments.

Program II, Nov. 27, 1984

1. Weatherman and anchorman exchange comments at beginning of forecast. Anchor: "Weather made the lead story today. You really went to extremes. When you said a storm was coming in you weren't just kidding around." Weatherman: "Gangbusters... How would you have liked to have been out on the bay in a sailboat today?" Anchorman: "I can think of almost 4,000 things I'd rather do." Both laugh.

2. Weatherman concludes forecast with comment about high waves. Anchorman: "More wildcaps tomorrow?" Weatherman: "Some wildcaps out there tomorrow too, but not as wild as today." Laughter.

3. Feature report on man interested in restoring old lighthouses includes humorous segment where man imitates fog signals with his voice.

4. Eyewitness Newsreel.

Program III, Nov. 28, 1984

1. Anchorman concludes report on contest to design toy cars powered by rubberbands: "Decision on the winner will be made next week

after all the excitement has wound down."

2. Reporter signs off on story about weight reduction. Anchorman comments: "Thank you, skinny."

3. Anchorman introduces weather forecast: "The long-range forecast came out today. The bad news is out west. Cold weather expected for the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada. (Weatherman laughs) Joel is laughing hartily because he doesn't believe in long-range forecasting. He barely believes in short-range forecasting."

4. Weatherman concludes report by noting accuracy of previous day's forecast. Anchorman comments: "Well, you're very close to a no-hitter there. You almost got a jackpot." Weatherman: "If I could do that in Vegas, I'd be happy." Laughter.

5. Conclusion of film report on local talk show hosts appearing on soap opera. Final shot shows actors laughing about stumbling over their lines. Anchorwoman laughs when camera returns to her.

6. Live remote report on Christmas tree lighting. Reporter talks to anchorwoman: "Santa Claus himself was ever here. . . and Kate I told him what you wanted for Christmas. And he said if you're a good girl he'll bring it to you." Laughter. Anchorwoman: "You read my mind. Thank you Barbara." Laughter.

7. Report by anchorman about actor Charleton Heston flying to Ethiopia to investigage famine. Report takes an ironic tone as anchor notes that Heston will travel on Regent Air, known as the world's most exclusive airline. "On the way to Africa he'll enjoy the services of a cosmetologist, a stock broker and a private secretary and he'll enjoy a five-course meal."

8. Report on bank's special display of Cabbage Patch Dolls concludes

with laughter as small child is asked if she wants one of the dolls. She replies, "no."

9. Eyewitness Newsreel.

Program IV, Nov. 29, 1984

1. Anchorwoman delivers report on Boston columnist's comments about Ted Kennedy's weight problems: "He recently noted that there's a lot more of the senator to watch lately. He looks like the World Trade Center in a blue suit."

2. Report by the program's "columnist" about complaints from viewers that station is running more commercials than in the past on its news programs. Columnist interviews advertising director who disputes viewer's claim. Anchorman comments: "Sorry about that."

3. Introduction to weather report. Anchroman talks to anchorwoman: "Well, what's the weather. You're going to take off on vacation. What kind of weather do you want?" Anchorwoman: "I don't care." Laughter. Anchorman: "You don't care? Well, in that case probably a hurricane." More laughter. Anchorman makes unintelligible comment about clouds. Weatherman: "They're alto cumulus clouds." Anchorman: "No soprano cumulus?" Weatherman: "No, and no bass cumulus either."

4. Weatherman concludes report: "I hate to say it, but rain is coming in tomorrow. Anchorman: "You hate to do it, but Kate doesn't care." Laughter.

5. Report on Crazy George, the professional cheerleader, which includes several humorous scenes of George at football games.

6. Anchorman delivers teasers for upcoming stories. As brief visual segments appear on screen, a glitch appears in the tape. Anchorman comments: "Wasn't that fun."

7. Eyewitness Newsreel.

Program V, Nov. 30, 1984

1. Reporter chuckles at conclusion of live report from Michael Jackson concert site, evidently in response to some off-camera activity. Anchorman comments: "Glad to see you can still maintain control in these exciting environments." Laughter.
2. Anchorman introduces weather report: "Now here's Joel with a meteorological enigma." Weatherman: "Do you want the good or the bad news first?" One anchor says "good" and the other says "bad." All laugh and weatherman tosses pencil in the air.
3. Conclusion of weather forecast, anchorman comments: "Joel will be back at eleven to ponder the meteorological question: why do they call it meteorological when it usually isn't." Laughter.
4. Report on man frustrated by high repair costs on new Cadillac. He is using a crane to lift the car 30 feet into the air and is planning to drop it "like a lemmon" being shaken from a tree.
6. Eyewitness Newsreel.
7. Teaser for 11 p.m. newscast delivered by one anchorman about a baby given the longest name in the world: "We will read the entire thing to you on Nightcast." Second anchorman: "You will. I can't pronounce it." First anchorman: "I'll do what I can."

To understand the way this content may convey structural or syntagmatic meanings it is necessary to examine how it fits into the sequence of events that make up the program. All five episodes contained 12 autonomous segments that were separated from one another by commercial breaks or clearly identified by change in subject. The first three segments contained short news reports

ranging in length from 20 seconds to 4 minutes. The fourth segment was sports, which begins the second half hour of the newscast. Sports is followed by another segment of brief news items, then comes a capsule of world news, followed by the weather report. After the weather is a videotaped feature report generally on a human interest subject. Next is another segment of short news items, a headline update of major stories and a business digest. The last main segment is the Eyewitness Newsreel, which is followed by closing announcements and comments by the two anchors.

Of the 39 instances of humor noted above only three appeared in the first half-hour of the program, that is in the first three news segments. Four instances appeared in the segment of short news items following sports, 11 were associated with the weather report and eight appeared in the segment of short items following the human interest feature. (See Appendix A for a complete tally of this data.)

Of the humorous instances that did appear in the first three segments, only one involved direct comment by an anchorperson: the report on the Michael Jackson concert. Humor in the other two was contained in the content of the news reports.

One conclusion that may be drawn from these observations is that, contrary to the fears of writers such as Ron Powers, the KPIX version of Eyewitness News is drawing a clear separation for its viewers between levity and serious news content. Humorous content is relegated for the most part to the second half of the program where the producers apparently believe it is more acceptable.

In a broad sense, the juxtaposition of the two halves of the program--one serious and one light--is being used by the producers to convey to viewers the notion that what is presented in the first segments of the program is highly significant, if only judged in contrast to what follows later.

However, there is another interpretation of this structure which is perhaps less flattering to the news producers. If one views the structure of the program as a progressive narrative which leads to a conclusion, then the preponderance of humor at the end serves to form a final context for all that has come before. Like the punchline of a joke, the Eyewitness Newsreel and the other concluding humor in effect tells the viewer that prior information is to be taken as entertainment, merely the exposition that sets the scene for a comic ending.

Another way of looking at this idea is suggested by Fiske and Hartley (1978, p. 166), who explore the structural sequencing of television programs and the notion of "boundary rituals." They note that commercials and other transitional devices serve as narrative signs indicating movement from one realm of experience to another, much like rituals such as marriage ceremonies delineate an individual's change in social state. "We use signs, either verbal or non-verbal, to separate the classes of actions from each other, and thus we create artificial boundaries in a field which is in fact naturally continuous," Fiske and Hartley write (p. 166).

One function of such boundary rituals is to allow one to subsume past experience within a new matrix of meaning. A

person who passes through the ceremony of marriage is to some extent changed and must view all experience past and present from a new vantage point. The ritual has marked the transition to a new frame of reference.

At least some of the humor present on Eyewitness News functions in this ritualistic manner. The semi-scripted banter between the weather reporter and the anchorman, for example, serves as a transitional sign which conveys the viewer from the experiential state of serious news to a frame of reference where levity is a possible, if not dominant, mode of behavior. To use the terminology of semiology, the paradigm of meaning has changed from that of news to that of entertainment.

One consequence of this transition has been suggested by Schudson (1982), who argues that news programs have a relationship to the "real world" not only in content but in form. Form delimits what aspects of reality can be communicated. The function of news conventions, Schudson writes, is "less to increase or decrease the truth value of the messages they convey than to shape and narrow the range of what kinds of truth can be told." Schudson is suggesting here that the conventional narrative structure of the news not only determines the order in which information is presented but also conveys a message about the attitude appropriate for interpreting that information. In addition, because the narrative structure is highly conventionalized it delimits the range of content that is admissible. As Schudson notes, narrative form not only describes a world but constructs one.

In this respect, the use of humor as a central feature of news

narrative structure not only validates its own presence but also justifies the exclusion of other material. In addition, it conveys an attitude of frivolity that is likely to shape the viewer's comprehension of the narrative as a whole.

Another meaning of humor indicated by the narrative structure of Eyewitness News has to do with the relatively obvious notion of comic relief. Juxtaposed to the serious early segments of the program, the humorous moments toward the end provide a respite from information that at times may be distressful or anxiety producing.

This idea suggests not only why humorous content might be appealing to viewers but also indicates something about the type of "news" one is likely to receive.

A list of stories featured in the opening segment of program number five reveals the range of topics typically encountered by a viewer: 1. new murder victim discovered; 2. police scandal over drugs; 3. double murder and suicide attempt; 4. sexual assaults on elderly women; 5. murder suspects sought; 6. reward announced in hunt for child's killer; 7. high speed chase following robbery; 8. speech by Rev. Jerry Falwell; 9. new downtown development plan.

Only the last two of these items are unrelated to crime or the threat of violence. As Dominick et.al. (1975) discovered in their study of WABC's Eyewitness News program in New York, news about violence or depicting violent acts is a central element in the Eyewitness format.

The juxtaposition of light content or humor with such anxiety arousing material is certain to be rich with meaning

for the viewer. One way of understanding the significance of this juxtaposition is to look at studies of the function of humor in other threatening or anxiety provoking circumstances.

Coser (1959), for example, investigated the uses of humorous banter among patients in a hospital ward. One of her main findings was that humor represented an expression of the collective experience of the participants in which they were able to psychologically control threatening circumstances by reducing them in importance. Jocular talk, in effect, makes fearful events manageable by giving them a quality of absurdity. As Coser puts it:

> The undesirable situation is being remedied, in the minds of those who are exposed to it, through humorous interpretation. The patients themselves, by bringing about a change in the definition of the situation, transform the undesirable into the harmless, the frightening into amusement, and thereby make the hospital ward acceptable as it is.

Similar conclusions were reached by Ullian (1976),who studied banter and humor in an industrial factory. He discovered that jocular talk was typically instigated in the presence of novel situations. Humor was used to transform tension-producing information into a less threatening commodity.

The joking and banter in the context of the news fulfills a similar function. One signified suggested by the presence of humor is that the threatening world described in the news is manageable and that one can psychologically cope. As Freud (1950, p. 220) wrote in an essay on humor, its meaning in the presence of anxiety often is, "Look here! This is all this seemingly dangerous world amounts to. Child's play, the very thing to jest about."

And yet there may be a more fundamental significance in the juxtaposition of news that may be terrifying with the humorous. As Coser points out, humor as a reducer of anxiety can be dysfunctional as well as functional. If threatening situations are remedied only in the perceptions of those being threatened, then an unsatisfactory situation may remain unchanged. Eyewitness News may be profoundly dysfunctional in this respect. The entertainment overtones and the message of jocular coping clearly have the power to divert viewers from seeking remedies for the problems presented in the news items. In addition, the structure of the program encourages the selection of news reports which focus on traumatic problems or situations rather than on meaningful trends and solutions.

In essence, Eyewitness News is doing its best to scare the wits out of people and then calming their anxieties with a dose of humor. It is a formula that, much like a horror movie, can be highly entertaining, especially if one is indeed calmed by the humorous content. However, it only works if you don't look over your shoulder to see what monster is really coming up from behind.

The range and type of humor presented in the Eyewitness News broadcasts is also revealing. In this analysis the various genres or techniques of humor may be regarded as categories which themselves are likely to convey certain signifieds of meaning. Slapstick humor, for example, not only makes possible a range of humorous situations but the choice of the genre itself suggests an attitude or stance of the performer to the audience and to the

circumstances in which the humor takes place.

Slapstick is appropriate and acceptable in the burlesque theater or in films by Buster Keaton. But one can't easily imagine the President of the United States, even if he is a former actor, engaging in slapstick in the context of a banquet speech, though he may tell a joke or two.

Berger (1984, p. 72) has identified 45 categories or techniques of humor, each of which falls within four broader paradigms: language, logic, identity and action. Slapstick, for example, comes within the paradigm of action, as does humor induced by the chase.

It is noteworthy that the preponderance of the humor present in the Eyewitness News broadcasts (at least that which is readily categorized) comes from the language and logic paradigms. There are seven instances of word plays, eight instances of irony, sarcasm or ridicule and three instances of logical comparison for humorous purpose (ie. the weatherman's comment about seagulls).

The most obvious explanation for this limited range of choices is that the conventions of the news presentation simply do not allow other forms of humor such as slapstick, impersonation or the grotesque, which fall within the identity or action paradigms. However, another explanation asserts itself if one considers the structure of much of this humor, especially the word plays. As Morreall (1983, p. 70) suggests, the humor present in word plays depends on phonological and typographical mechanics of language. Humor is achieved by unexpected similarity of sounds, mispronunciation or double meanings. Thus, when the anchorwoman inadvertently changes "Nightcast" to "Nicecast," the humor, such as

it is, derives from the surprise phonic variation. A similar, though more complex, example is the anchorman's use of the phrase, "when the excitement has wound down," in the story about rubberband driven toy cars. In both examples humor is evoked by what amounts to linguistic ambiguity.

The signifieds that are conveyed by this type of humor fall into two seemingly contradictory categories. One involves the simplicity and relative harmlessness of the humor. The other has to do with the fact that this kind of humor focuses attention on language itself and its mechanical construction. In this respect, the use of word plays, as well as other types of humor from the language and logic paradigms, may carry signifieds associated with "literaryness" or the conventions of print.

With regard to the first of these categories, McGhee (1979, p. 138) points out that linguistic ambiguity is one of the earliest sources of humor for children. Such humor rarely has a target or victim, but rather produces its response through the manipulation of language and the pleasure of sensing multiple symbolic possibilities in words. Word play humor therefore does not seem to fulfill the aggressive function of some humor as noted by Freud and others.[1]

Word play humor on Eyewitness News retains this childlike, if not childish, quality. With the possible exception of the anchorman's comment about the illogic of meteorology, the humorous outcome was not achieved at the expense of the participants in

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[1]McGhee does suggest, however, that this benign quality is not always present in wordplays. He cites W.C. Fields' remark that there should be "clubs for children" (p. 135).

the program or subjects of news reports.

One conclusion suggested by this fact is that the function of the word play humor and its benign qualities is to humanize the anchorperson, to make him or her less austere or remote. In effect, the choice of humor from the word play category conveys the simple meaning: this person is merely one of us, making jokes even a child can understand. Support for this notion comes from the fact that instances of irony and sarcasm, which did target a victim, were not generated spontaneously by the anchorpersons themselves. Rather such humor was contained in story content. On the other hand, all of the word play humor came directly from the horse's mouth, with the possible exception of the story about the rubberband driven cars.

In a somewhat paradoxical manner, this same humor also seems to convey meanings associated with the sophisticated communication modes of literature and print. Fiske and Hartley (1978, p. 190) argue that television news stands at the crossroads of literate and oral modes. As they put it, ". . . clarity, consistency, 'logical' exposition of causes, balance, precision; all are derived via journalistic codes from modes of thought appropriate to literate discourse." Plays on words, parody and irony--among others from Berger's language and logic categories--reflect this association with the literary mode. Even though this material is delivered orally, it relies heavily on a self conscious use of language which evokes, and is indeed made possible by, cognizance of the printed word. In effect, by arousing such literary associations, choices from these paradigms of humor are justifying the presence of humor by suggesting a harmony with journalistic/literary conventions.

Consider, for example, the weatherman's brief quip that the "word for weather today is cloudy and cold--actually that's two words." This remark passes virtually unnoticed, but it conveys signifieds of logical consistency and grammatical correctness, both literate virtues.

The use of parody in the Eyewitness Newsreel and ironic reports about the British royal family, Ted Kennedy and Charleton Heston also suggest literary signifieds. Indeed the source of the Kennedy report was a Boston newspaper columnist.

Berger (1984, p. 71) points out the close relationship between parody as a technique of humor and literary form. Parody originated, he notes, with the imitation of literary styles or particular genres of writing. The success of parody as humor depends on the reader's prior knowledge of the target. The uninformed reader is left out.

Likewise, the viewer of the Eyewitness Newsreel who has not seen a newsreel in the motion picture theater or who is not familiar with the announcing style used in that genre will miss at least some of the humor. On the other hand, those viewers who do recognize the parody will not only find it amusing in its own right, but may also receive associative meanings derived from parody's inherently literary activity of bringing form and style to conscious attention.

In sum, the choice of humorous paradigms in the Eyewitness News broadcasts is likely to convey two broad meanings to the viewer. On the one hand is the sense that the authoritative figures who deliver the news are in fact much like everyone else, capable of simple jokes and childlike humor. This meaning, of course, is consistent with this paper's earlier determination

that one structural signified of humor in the news is that threatening content is merely childsplay.

On the other hand, the preponderance of humorous choices from language and logic paradigms is likely to evoke the conventional journalistic structure of the program, based as it is on literary modes of thought. Thus, in a rather circular manner, the particular types of humor tend to justify themselves by being consistent with and drawing attention to the journalistic/literary conventions.

CONCLUSIONS

By using a semiological approach this paper has tried to point out the meanings that may be conveyed to viewers by the presence of humor in a television newscast. The paper argued that humor serves as a "boundary ritual," thereby creating a meaning context that is likely to minimize or reduce in significance other, presumably more serious,content. The paper also suggested that humor fulfills an anxiety reduction function and may lure viewers into the comforting belief that threatening news can be merely "laughed away." Finally, the paper noted that the type of humor prevalent in the news may function to humanize the anchorpersons; it may also evoke literary overtones that tend to justify humor in terms of journalistic conventions.

These conclusions are indeed preliminary and should be the focus of much more intensive investigation involving more than one program. However, one thing that becomes clear from this analysis is that the arrival of humor as an accepted part of the news narrative indicates a shift in the framework in which

information about public events is likely to be understood and interpreted by the audience. The power of narrative convention, as Schudson (1982) points out, is to give tacit instructions about what is important. Conventional narratives are, in effect, the way a culture tells some stories and leaves others untold. Because they are familiar, readily understood and often transparent the conventions themselves convey the message that "this is the way things are naturally and normally done." Humor's presence as an integral part of the television news "language" is therefore likely to have a profound influence on the way viewers see the world. To borrow a phrase used by Stuart Hall (1982), meaning does not depend on how things are but how they are signified.

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APPENDIX A

Program segments	Number of humorous items*
1. Short news reports	0
2. Short news reports	1
3. Short news reports	2
4. Sports	2
5. Short news reports	4
6. World news capsule	0
7. Weather	11
8. Feature story	4
9. Short news reports	8
10. News update/business capsule	0
11. Eyewitness Newsreel	5
12. Closing comments/sign off	2
Total:	39

*Numbers represent total number of humorous items per program segment for the five broadcasts surveyed.

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